

THURSDAY  
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# Current status of county home

## Sullivan nursing home tops state in health deficiencies

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The current incarnation of Sullivan County Health Care is that of a 156-bed licensed nursing facility geared toward caring for the health of the elderly members of the community.

Annice Finan moved to the home from Woodlawn Nursing Home in Newport about two-and-a-half years ago and is pleased with the care she is receiving.

"The care here is better," Finan said. "They pay more attention to your needs."

Finan said she was a little apprehensive when she first made the move, but is glad she did.

"They make you feel at home," Finan said. "They are friendly people."

Finan, a native New Yorker, said she participates in many activities at the home, including quilting and attending shows with live entertainment.

"I would recommend this place to my friends," Finan said.

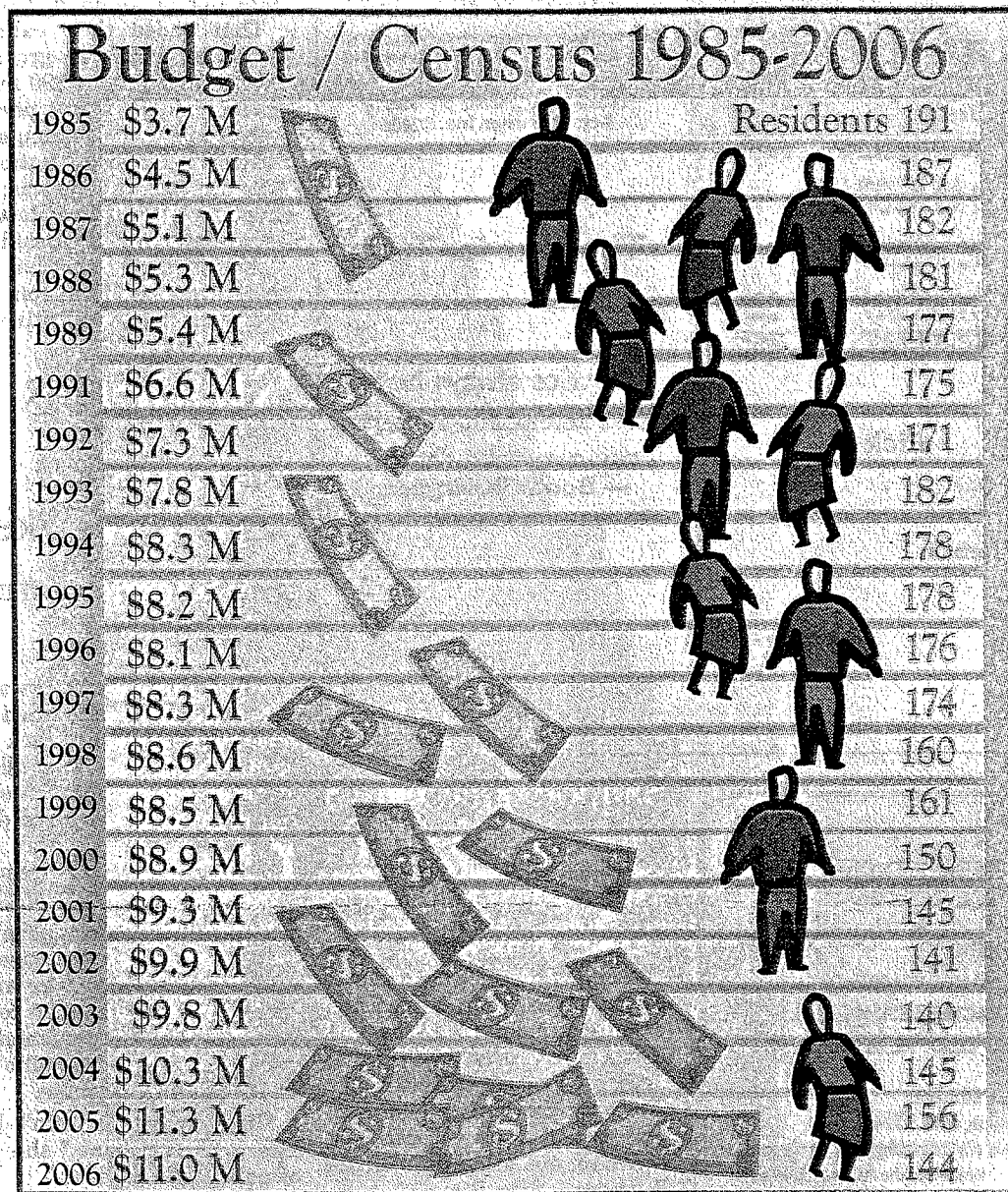
Many residents feel the care they receive at the home is first-class and not reflected in the statistics.

But according to several reports, the health of the nursing home is anything but good with the facility failing a recent health and safety inspection, the inability to fill empty beds, running million dollar deficits, the staff working under an expired union contract and skyrocketing budgets.

### Failed health and safety inspections

According to New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services reports that provide information on quality measures and inspection results, the nursing home, Sullivan County Health Care, had the highest number of health and safety violations of any of the 11 state-run nursing homes in New Hampshire.

The reports, updated as of Dec. 4, state that the average number of health deficiencies at nursing homes throughout the state is five, with the average in the country at eight. The



Sullivan County nursing home had a total of 18 deficiencies reported — the worst in the state.

By comparison, Merrimack and Cheshire county nursing homes, with 286 and 150 beds, respectively, had no health deficiencies cited during the same reporting period. Strafford County, with 215 beds, had 14 reported and Carroll County, with 103 beds,

had 12. All other county nursing homes reported between one and seven health deficiencies with a majority in the lower range.

Examples of the health deficiencies reported at Sullivan County Health Care are the failure to protect residents from mistreatment, neglect or theft of personal property,

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failure to give each resident care and services to get or keep the highest quality of life possible, failure to make sure that residents are safe from serious medication errors and failure to properly mark drugs and other similar products.

One of the most serious deficiencies occurred March 31 when a resident living in the MacConnell Unit — used for people with dementia-type diseases — was able to exit the building around 5:30 p.m. because the magnetic doors did not latch securely.

A review of the nurse's notes reveals a passerby in a car alerted the nurse that the resident had fallen down a 15-foot embankment outside the nursing home. The fall resulted in a fractured wrist.

A report of the incident stated the resident was taken to the hospital immediately after the fall and was diagnosed with a sprained left wrist. An addendum dated April 2 indicated the wrist was broken and the resident should be re-examined.

During an interview of three staff members April 10 by DHHS, the members stated they had no knowledge of the addendum indicating a fracture. They also stated the resident "has not been seen by a physician nor had a re-examination of the left wrist since returning from the March 31 hospital evaluation."

Director of nursing Becky Trudell said the statistics are not a true reflection of the day-to-day activities at the home.

"I want people to know there is excellent staff here that give excellent care," Trudell said. "They care about the residents."

Another deficiency was noted to have occurred March 31 when containers of Vitamin A&D Ointment and Elta Seal ointment were left at a resident's bedside. The resident "had a spoon with the above mixture on it and placed the spoon with the mixture on the resident's own tongue."

The nurse's notes indicate the resident did not ingest the mixture and the poison control center was notified. Additionally, the resident was found not to have a physician order for the use of either of the ointments.

This incident resulted in the aforementioned deficiency for failure to make sure that residents are safe from serious medication errors and failure to properly mark drugs and other similar products.

Fire code deficiencies was another area where Sullivan County ranked poorly. The average number of deficiencies at state nursing homes is two and the county reported three.

In total, Sullivan County had 21 deficiencies, ranking it at the bottom for state-run nursing homes. In comparison, both Merrimack and Cheshire counties had no deficiencies reported in any category.

The number of deficiencies has risen dramatically over the past few years. During the

2006 inspection, five deficiencies were found and in 2005 there were 10.

Administrator Ted Purdy said he is working to improve the image of the home.

"We are setting a new standard of performance," Purdy said. "Our goal is to set a new bar and build on the good work that has been done."

## A decrease in the number of patients

Whether or not the high number of health and safety infractions has a direct impact on the ability of the nursing home to fill empty beds is up for debate, but the reality is the number of patients, or the census, has declined over the past two years.

According to DHHS, the percentage of beds filled throughout the state ranges from a low of 75 percent at Coos County Nursing Hospital to a high of 99 percent at both the Coos County Nursing Home and Rockingham County Nursing Home. All other homes fall between 84 and 95 percent.

The census at the Sullivan County nursing home currently ranges in the low 130s, or 86 percent, leaving more than 20 beds unfilled. The average census in 2005 was 156 and in 2006 it was 144. The daily loss of income from the unfilled beds is about \$4,000 — thus sending the home further into debt.

Staffing levels during the same period have increased from 191 in 2005 to 222 in 2006.

According to county reports, from the late 1950s into the early 1980s the home was running at 100 percent capacity with a waiting list numbering between 40 and 100. During that time there was talk of expanding the building by constructing a new wing to meet the demand.

Between 1986 and 1987 the home's capacity was reduced from 193 beds to 188 beds, and demand for the beds began to wane. By the end of the 1990s, the home was running at 85 percent capacity until 2000 when the number of licensed beds was again reduced to the current level of 156.

During the first six months of this fiscal year ending Dec. 31, the nursing home had 72 admissions and 76 discharges, according to a nursing home report.

For the month of December, the census fell short in the four patient categories of Medicare, Medicaid, private insurance and respite care. The budget shortfall for the month, according to a nursing home report, totaled \$98,000.

## Increasing deficits at the nursing home

The first year the county saw a major deficit at the nursing home was in 2000 when it had a deficit of \$1.5 million and by 2002 it had risen to \$1.9 million. In comparison, there was a \$225,000 surplus reported in 1997 and a \$168,000 surplus in 1998.

At the end of fiscal 2007

County	Number of Beds	Number of Health Deficiencies	Number of Fire Deficiencies	Total	Ranking
Merrimack	286	0	0	0	1st
Cheshire	150	0	0	0	2nd
Grafton	135	1	2	3	3rd
Coos Home	100	1	2	3	4th
Belknap	94	3	0	3	5th
Coos Hospital	97	1	5	6	6th
Rockingham	226	6	2	8	7th
Hillsborough	300	7	2	9	8th
Carroll	103	12	6	18	9th
Strafford	215	14	5	19	10th
Sullivan	156	18	3	21	11th

**According to Medicare - As of Dec. 4, 2007**

Average number of health deficiencies in N.H. = 5

Average number of health deficiencies in U.S. = 8

Average number of fire deficiencies in N.H. = 2

Average number of fire deficiencies in U.S. = 3

which ended June 30, the county home ran a deficit of about \$2.2 million. Unless the census rises significantly, the home is again on track to post a \$1.4 million deficit, according to Purdy.

In the face of such a high potential loss, the commissioners requested a spending freeze of about \$800,000 affecting all county departments, including the nursing home.

As part of that freeze, many capital improvements at the home were slashed from the budget, including installation of a new air-conditioning system and reducing the extent of landscaping for a savings of about \$312,000.

To make the financial matter worse, the New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services will reduce the Medicaid reimbursement rate to Sullivan County Feb. 1, from \$155 per day to \$144. According to Purdy, the rate change will reduce revenue an additional \$32,000 per month.

New auditing rules also take effect for the upcoming budget when the county will be forced to add the value of depreciation of county property to the budget. This could amount to hundreds of thousands of dollars and, coupled with the deficit from the previous year, puts the nursing home far into the red before a single penny is spent to care for the elderly residents at the home.

**Staffing issues and skyrocketing budgets**

To further complicate the issue, nursing home staff members have been working without a union contract for more than a year. The reasons for impasse are unknown because negotiations with the commissioners take place behind closed doors in executive session.

Former county manager Ed Gil de Rubio said last year as negotiations were continuing that the key sticking point was health care.

A spokesperson for the union would not comment on the sta-

tus of the negotiations.

According to Trudell, the home is using agency nursing to fill unstaffed shifts about 15 percent of the time. She said that those working at the home are receiving pay comparable to others working in the field.

"Finding nurses in hard and nationwide there is a shortage," Trudell said. "In a rural setting it's even more difficult."

As county politicians enter the budget season, they face ever-increasing costs for health care.

In 1897, the total budget for the county was \$6,000. By 1971, that number had increased to \$1.5 million and 10 years later had jumped to \$4.7 million.

Within a decade, the budget for the nursing home alone was \$6.6 million in 1991 and in 2006 had increased to \$11 million.

Overall, the statistics indicate that Sullivan County Health Care is in poor health and is in need of change on many fronts so it can continue to provide the care residents in the county deserve.

Trudell was asked if she would bring a loved one to the home.

"Absolutely," Trudell said. "My first choice would be to keep them at home, but I can't because I work."

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*The third part of this three-part series will appear in Friday's Eagle Times. It will talk about the future of the nursing home and how it is likely that costs will continue to rise.*